

# *Sketch*

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Mrs. Eggleston

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# Mrs. Eggleston

Evogene G. Wallace

H. Ec. Jr.

MRS. EGGLESTON sat on her front porch fanning herself violently, and glared at her voile dress clinging tenaciously to a plump, wet arm. With a quick jerk she pulled the sleeve up and down to air it, dropped it, and watched it fall back feebly. Irritably she pulled the red hair out from under her collar and glared down the street.

The street glistened in the afternoon sun like a rough lake; each brick waved and tossed separately. Occasionally the wind blew a candy wrapper and beat it against the curbing. At each rustle Mrs. Eggleston sat up straight in her chair and peered down the street, her blue eyes struggling against the red of her cheeks. She winced at the sun and held the fan over her eyes like a shade, scowling more violently when she saw nothing.

The idea of keeping her waiting like this—the idea. Forty-five minutes, and here in the blazing sun, and her with a cake to make and no time for tomfoolery. She groaned a little at the helplessness of her situation. She was too hot even to get mad properly, but the insolence of the man! She was ruining her dress, too, and her girdle cut in at her waist until she was afraid she couldn't breathe. She straightened up suddenly and peered down the street. Well, she'd show him, she would. She'd just be mighty cool, she would,—the old—fool. Look at him—walking along as slow and easy as if he weren't nearly a whole hour late—she'd show him. She set her mouth grimly and watched him walk toward her—overgrown boy that he was. Without a practical hair in his head, that's what. Just like his always wanting to take her to those band concerts. Pah! She could hear better music than that right here on her on porch on her own radio without walking way over to the park and sitting on those sticky green benches. She didn't even like the kind of music they played. She was a fool herself to have said she'd go today except that she wanted to see the swells who went to art galleries. She'd read about them a lot in the papers, and today they were showing a new collection. There'd be bound to be some of those people there. She'd been curious about them for years now. Her husband Tom had been a chauffeur for a couple of years for one of

the bigger families. He had told her wonderful things about their parties and their love affairs. Better stuff than the movies shot at you—more to the point. She felt a little weepy what with being so uncomfortable and thinking about Tom and missing him more than she had for months. On a day like this Tom would be here on the porch beside her, wiping his sweaty face on his arms and leaning back in his chair with a can of beer in his hand. He'd be swearing at her and at the weather and at the neighbor's radio, but she'd just smile and let him swear and feel that her own attitude toward the situation was taken care of.

**S**HE frowned seeing Mr. Powers coming toward her. He was such a funny man. Too mild and meek and dreamy for her taste, but she had to be nice to him. He was an ideal boarder, prompt and courteous and simple. She never had to ask him for his rent, and she never had to clean his room. He had explained about that at the beginning and had kept his room locked all the time besides. It must be a mess. No man could ever keep a room straight by himself. Heaven only knew what this one must be like with all those boxes he had toted to and from the house. But it was none of her business. She paid no attention to him at all except on some nights when she missed Tom a lot or when he looked pretty lonesome himself. She could never decide how old he was. He could have been forty or sixty. His eyes were forty. His hair was sixty. Not that it mattered to her. She might be a widow and forty-five herself but she wasn't putting herself out for any Mr. Powers. Nosirree. She'd let him take her to a movie now and then and of course this art show or whatever it was this afternoon but that was as far as it went. They just didn't talk alike. She didn't even like the way he talked particularly. It was sort of different and amused like.

He walked up the steps now and stood before her, fanning his face with his hat.

"Mrs. Eggleston, how cool and refreshed you look. I hope you feel as lovely as you look."

Now that was what she didn't like about his talk. She never knew whether he was kidding or not.

**W**ELL, Mr. Powers, I'm glad I *look* cool, for I'm certainly not. Where have you been that you've taken so long? I've been waiting for an hour and a half and I'm getting mighty tired of it, let me tell you."

"Really, I'm very sorry, believe me, Mrs. Eggleston. But I've had some very—ah—important business matters to attend to; otherwise I'd have been here on the hour. You know that, don't you, Mrs. Eggleston?"

That was the trouble with him. He had a way of making you feel like a rat for scolding him and like a fool for believing him.

"Well, if we're going, we'd better get going. I'll go get my hat on the table. Just a minute."

"Let me get it for you, Mrs. Eggleston. I feel fine myself, and this is a great day for me, so let me do something for you."

He was a very funny man.

Walking down the street beside him, she felt a little proud to have Mrs. MacNeill and Mrs. Norton see her go by. Mr. Powers dressed so nicely and smartly she felt nice herself being seen with him. And he was polite. Yes, he was. He helped her up and down curbs all the way to the museum and seemed to be protecting her from the cars as they whizzed past her.

She'd seen the museum from the outside many times before. It irritated her a little to see it blaze down at her just the same as it always had before. She was really hot now and her eyes were half closed from squinting at the sun. She followed Mr. Powers through the heavy door and felt the cool darkness of the inside rush around her. She drew herself up and wiped the beads of sweat from her upper lip. She must look a sight with her dress all wet and sticky and wrinkled. She reached for a strap cutting her arm and pulled it up. If there were only some place where she could comb her hair or something. She hated to look a sight in front of all those people. She wished she could find a nice pillar so she could peek at them from behind. Mr. Powers was half through the door. He must really be a crackpot on art the way he dashed for the door. Well, as long as she was here she might as well see it. She gave her dress a final jerk and followed Mr. Powers.

**S**HE needn't have worried about her dress. There wasn't another person in the room. What kind of a show was this anyhow. Poor guy who painted the collection, if only she and Mr. Powers came to see it. The pictures confused her anyway. They were all gray and somber. She liked a more cheerful picture herself. Guess she liked a pretty girl in a picture as well as any man did. These were all pictures of boxes and barrels and streets.

Funny, one of them looked like Stanton Street. Wouldn't it be a scream if someone had painted Stanton Street! She walked over to the picture and looked at it carefully. It sure did look like Stanton Street. She must call Mr. Powers' attention to it. He'd appreciate that. Mr. Powers was standing in front of a big picture of a fat woman. Her dress was wrinkled and her face was hot. She was sitting in a chair as though she were exhausted and had a can of beer in her hand. She looked repulsive and smelly. The picture was all gray except for the beer can. It was bright blue. What an awful mess these pictures were! Where did he get the models or whatever they were?

"Ah, Mrs. Eggleston, and how do you like the exhibit?"

"Well, I wouldn't have a single one in my living room myself, but maybe somebody else'd like them. Who painted them or drew them or whatever it is?"

"The name plate is on each of the pictures, see?"

She rescued her strap and leaned forward.

"Man called Winston H. Powers. Mr. Powers, is that man you?" She felt the blood rush to her head and cold at the roots of her hair. "Mr. Powers, you're not the one?"

"Mrs. Eggleston, how could you have guessed it? Hmmmmm, my guess is you've known it all the time. Now have you, Mrs. Eggleston?"

MRS. EGGLESTON stood stiff and steady. So this was *the* Mr. Powers now. And she had thought—all her forty-five years ran backwards. She could have been smart enough to figure that out. All those boxes. His room locked. His "business" down town. What a fool she'd been. Why, he was one of the swells she had come to see. Only there weren't any. That was strange. Where were all the people who came to see an art show?

She and Mr. Powers were walking out now. She felt the sun blast at her out the door, heard a policeman's whistle, saw a sign, "Tonight—Exhibit by Winston H. Powers." and found herself in a taxi minus Mr. Powers.

What a fool, what a fool—she was only forty-five—Winston Powers—bachelor? How much did artists make—successful artists—Winston Powers. Those pictures—gray and somber like her boarding house. That picture—that fat woman. Her. That was her. Why, the old fool—drawing pictures of her—her!